



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence

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# Prospects for the Angolan Civil War in 1987

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Special National Intelligence Estimate  
Memorandum to Holders

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## SCOPE NOTE

The military dimension continues to dominate the situation in Angola and both sides are promising new military initiatives. This Memorandum to Holders of SNIE 71-86, *Angola: Short-Term Prospects for UNITA*, published in February 1986, focuses on the changes in the military situation as a result of the fighting last year, new strategies considered by the two sides, our assessment of the most likely outcome of both the fighting and political activity this year, and the roles of external forces in Angola.

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The 1986 Estimate looked at the implications of what was expected to be the most significant military development of the year—a major government offensive against UNITA-held territory in southeastern Angola. The anticipated offensive did not materialize as expected, and the implications discussed in the Estimate were moot. In a sense, last year was a hiatus in the progress of the conflict and, as anticipated, neither side made gains that altered the military picture decisively. The government remains committed to a military solution and has not, as anticipated, made any realistic approaches to UNITA for reconciliation.

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Despite the unprecedented scale of preparation during 1986, Luanda apparently became embroiled in an internal debate over the timing and scope of the offensive, postponed and rescheduled the operation on several occasions, and ultimately decided in favor of a more cautious but sustained approach. None of the reasons that explain the lack of an offensive—logistic shortfalls, UNITA operations in the north, and threat of South African intervention—were unfamiliar. In retrospect, however, they were not given sufficient weight, although logistic shortfalls, among other reasons, was cited as a reason the offensive might be delayed and slow to develop.

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The various factors considered in assessing the implications of the offensive remain generally valid. The government, as expected, continues to be focused on Mavinga as the general objective of its operations and deployments. Preparatory moves continue to be oriented in that direction. UNITA also expected the offensive and, as anticipated, adopted a strategy that attempted to derail the buildup, although the insurgents apparently now are considering some changes. The principal outside backers, the Soviets and Cubans for the government side and

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South Africa for the insurgents, played their roles much as anticipated in the Estimate and hewed to established patterns. Recent indications that Pretoria is considering some limits on its involvement were generally anticipated, with the expectation that South Africa's actions would be carefully calculated and limited to a measured response [REDACTED]

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

Military initiatives by either side in the coming year are not likely to produce a resolution of the conflict or swing the initiative decisively in either direction. [REDACTED]

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Both Luanda and UNITA have reoriented their strategies for the campaigns this year. UNITA apparently is planning to put more emphasis on guerrilla warfare to increase pressure on the government. The insurgents plan to increase activity in central and northern Angola but anticipate losing some territory to the government in the southeast. UNITA, however, probably will make a stand at Mavinga if it is threatened. The government wants to keep the pressure on the insurgents and plans large, cautious advances with carefully consolidated gains. The government intends to minimize its risks in the belief that time is on its side [REDACTED]

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### Key Factors

There are several key factors that will affect the ability of either side to carry through with its plans:

- UNITA probably can increase its activity in central and northern Angola where it has previous experience, but operations near the capital or against the oil industry will be difficult. Logistic support for expanded guerrilla activity will be difficult.
- The government's intention to launch slow-moving, multibrigade operations takes advantage of its strength in conventional weaponry. The road-bound government forces, however, depend on a vulnerable supply line and will fight in a trackless region where UNITA controls the countryside. Moreover, UNITA has had appreciable success in blunting government airpower and armor advantages.
- Degree of popular support, Army morale, leadership resolve, and state of the economy bear strongly on the situation. Changes in these factors this year probably will not be sufficient to cause a decisive swing in events.
- South Africa's commitment to UNITA will remain strong, although there are indications that Pretoria is considering limitations on its involvement because of increasing risks, costs, and other priorities. Nevertheless, if the insurgents were to be in serious danger, South Africa most likely would intervene to remove the immediate threat.

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- Angola's Soviet and Cuban backers are no doubt concerned by developments in Angola, but, as long as the regime or their influence is not in immediate danger, they probably will continue with their traditional roles of supplier and backer. A serious deterioration in the security situation or major South African intervention would most likely prompt increased or more direct involvement.

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### Alternative Outcomes

Uncertainties over the influence of the key factors on the military initiatives by either side suggest that alternative outcomes are possible.

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**More Likely.** Neither side is likely to gain a decisive advantage. Steady government pressure in the southeast is likely to produce some territorial gains; Mavinga may be threatened, but UNITA headquarters at Jamba most likely will remain secure:

- Insurgent activity probably will increase in central and northern Angola, but not to the extent that Luanda will be forced into a major pullback from the southeast.
- The Soviet and Cuban commitment is likely to continue at about present levels as will South African aid to the insurgents. A serious threat to Mavinga, however, probably would prompt a South African intervention in considerable force.
- There is an increased chance for small-scale conflict along the Angola-Zaire border this year, but Luanda is not likely to sponsor a major attack. Increased Zairian insecurities, however, are most likely to stimulate new requests for security assistance from its Western supporters.

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**Less Likely.** The situation could tilt more favorably toward either side although it is highly unlikely that the shift will be decisive:

- Careful military moves by Luanda combined with less than expected insurgent resistance could allow government forces to move faster and farther. A serious threat to Mavinga and a major South African intervention could provoke a direct confrontation with Cuban troops. In the event of a clash, it is not likely that either side would immediately push toward a major escalation of the conflict.
- On the other hand, successful UNITA harassment of the ponderous government columns combined with a significant increase in northern guerrilla activity would present Luanda with the dilemma of whether or not to abandon its southeastern

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operations to enhance defenses around the capital or vital oil facilities. A deterioration in the security situation probably would, as in the past, lead to increased Soviet and Cuban support in arms or Cuban troop augmentation. [REDACTED]

### Diplomatic Arena

Luanda's concentration on a military solution, in our view, underestimates UNITA's political and military strengths and South Africa's commitment and makes serious movement toward reconciliation with UNITA virtually nil. UNITA's price for cooperation on the reopening of the Benguela Railroad is not likely to be acceptable to Luanda. [REDACTED]

***Implications for the United States.*** Luanda apparently is counting on a favorable change in US policy and is not likely to be receptive to new initiatives during the period of this Estimate. Although the regime probably will keep informal lines of communication open, the conditions it has attached to resumption of serious discussions over a US-brokered regional settlement probably will continue to stall negotiations. [REDACTED]

Luanda most likely will continue its diplomatic efforts to focus regional and international criticism on US support for UNITA. Luanda also is likely to complement its diplomatic efforts with a public relations campaign to offset UNITA's efforts to gain support. [REDACTED]

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## DISCUSSION

1. Since publication of SNIE 71-86 in February 1986, there have been several developments in the Angolan civil war that will affect the course of the conflict:

- Luanda failed to launch the expected major offensive and debated its options for dealing with UNITA. The year ended with the positions of the combatants relatively unchanged.
- UNITA attempted to preempt government operations and distract Luanda's concentration on the southeast. Recently the insurgents have chosen to increase guerrilla operations, especially in the north.
- South Africa is considering limitations on its involvement because of increasing risk and cost.

### UNITA To Intensify Guerrilla Operations

2. Developments during the year in the southeast have prompted UNITA to consider reorienting its strategy to more directly pressure the government. The insurgents believe increased guerrilla operations in the north will produce gains and draw off government forces from the southeast. To do so, UNITA intends to reorganize conventional battalions defending the Munhango and Lungue-Bungo approaches into smaller guerrilla formations. With its guerrilla strength enhanced, UNITA plans to increase its activity in central and western Angola as well as intensify operations against economic and administrative targets in the northern part of the country.

3. UNITA anticipates it may lose some territory it has controlled since 1983, particularly in Moxico Province. The insurgents expect the government to continue the pressure in 1987, and UNITA will harass and resist the advancing government columns and supply lines. UNITA probably will, however, make a stand at Mavinga if it is threatened. To this end, the insurgents will maintain the strength of their conventional forces in the Cuito Cuanavale area and are organizing a reserve at Mavinga to defend a position they consider vital.

### Growth of UNITA Insurgency

Following its defeat by Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) and Cuban troops in early 1976, a few months after Angola's independence, UNITA withdrew into the bush. Savimbi and his retreating forces sought security in the sparsely populated southeast. At first, only occasional operations were conducted, while the major effort was devoted to recruiting additional personnel, capturing or establishing new sources of supplies, and building political support domestically and abroad. The location of his redoubt was ideal for receiving help from South African forces in Namibia and from other countries. Meanwhile, FAPLA began integrating massive amounts of new Soviet equipment and reorganizing and training its forces for conventional operations.

The movement grew rapidly, reaching 20,000 to 25,000 men by 1981 and 35,000 by 1983, and in the process forced semiconventional battalions that began to be used in large-scale assaults on isolated government outposts, such as Cangamba in August 1983 and provincial capitals such as Sumbe in March 1984. Nevertheless, UNITA continued to place major emphasis on guerrilla operations and on expanding the areas where it could routinely operate. UNITA was conducting operations in 12 of Angola's 17 provinces by 1983.

In the 1980s the government has regularly conducted offensive operations in the dry seasons, with UNITA increasing activity during the rainy seasons. UNITA occasionally sought to take and hold territory but more often became satisfied merely to demonstrate the government's lack of control. UNITA has from its first years sought to demonstrate to the local population its legitimacy and its capability to govern and provide services. By 1985 UNITA was routinely conducting operations in provinces north of Luanda.

### Luanda's Cautious Approach

4. Luanda appears prepared to carry on the main strategic themes worked out last year, most notably its efforts to apply steady pressure on the southeast. In Luanda's view, time is on its side; the government anticipates that a change in the US administration, as well as increasing internal conflict in South Africa and the effect of international sanctions, will force UNITA's principal backers to cut back on support. In



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Luanda's calculation, the best move in the near term is to sustain the pressure on the insurgents, minimize risks, and, at all costs, avoid a major defeat. Militarily, this means large, well-supported, but cautious advances with gains carefully consolidated before subsequent moves. Although Luanda is focused on a military solution to the conflict, politically, the government will trail the bait of reconciliation in hopes of generating dissension within insurgent ranks. Moreover, Luanda has reportedly devoted substantial resources to a public relations campaign to negate UNITA's effort to gain allies and international recognition.

5. Recent government moves in the southeast, involving an unusual rainy season operation, appear to be the opening gambit in this strategy. According to government officials, Luanda chose to launch the attack during the November-April rainy season so as to tie down insurgent forces and forestall the usual seasonal UNITA gains. Government brigades crossed the Lungue-Bungo River in early December, established a bridgehead—including tactical surface-to-air missile defenses—but have been challenged by UNITA forces and have only advanced about 10 kilometers. Most of the government forces appear to be tied down in rear area security.

#### Influence of Key Factors

6. Despite the intentions of the combatants to adopt new strategies, there are several factors that will affect the ability of either side to successfully carry through with its plans.

#### UNITA's Military Performance

7. The reorganization into smaller guerrilla units probably will not present any significant difficulty, and UNITA will have less problem with small unit operations than it sometimes had with its larger conventional battalions. UNITA probably can increase its level of activity in central Angola, where it enjoys traditional tribal support, and in the north, where it has had three years of sustained operational experience and recently increased its activity. For UNITA to significantly increase the pressure on the government, however, it will have to threaten the capital—where the insurgents have not enjoyed major success before—and attack the oil industry, the government's economic buttress, which so far has proved to be UNITA's most difficult target.

8. The insurgents, however, will find it more difficult logistically to support extended guerrilla operations. UNITA's logistic officers have admitted that northern operations have been one of their most

difficult problems and it is likely to be exacerbated by increased demands and the potential threat to the insurgent supply line in the southeast. UNITA, however, hopes to offset possible shortages by establishing supply lines through Zaire, and President Mobutu probably will be sympathetic to UNITA's requests.

#### Military Capabilities

9. Slow-moving, multibrigade, cautious, and well-supplied offensives will take advantage of Luanda's traditional strengths in firepower, airpower, equipment, and numbers. The government formations have demonstrated that they can make progress against UNITA in conventional operations, and they probably can continue to do so. Nevertheless, the government forces remain generally road bound and, in the southeast, where there are few roads of any quality, government advances will tend to be channeled along a narrow frontage leaving the insurgents relatively free use of interior areas. In addition, the deeper they move into UNITA territory, the greater the demand on forces to guard the vital supply line.

10. UNITA also is likely to have some success in blunting government advantages in weapons. Insurgent use of portable surface-to-air missiles last year apparently forced the government to cut back on close air support and adopt more restrictive tactics following losses of fighters and helicopters. Moreover, UNITA has formed a specially trained antitank unit that reportedly has been fielded successfully against government armored units. Countermeasures are likely, but UNITA has demonstrated that government forces are vulnerable.

#### The Internal Situation

11. The degree of popular support enjoyed by the government, Army morale, resolve of the leadership, and the economic situation bear as strongly on the situation as do more narrowly focused military factors. A major change in any of these factors this year sufficient to swing events decisively in either direction is not likely. The volatile situation makes more precise prediction difficult, however. Creation of mass support is an important element of insurgent operations and UNITA probably puts more effort into it than does the government. Suspicions of the various ethnic

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### Oil Earnings

Oil accounts for more than 90 percent of total Angolan exports and the sharp decline in oil prices since 1985 cut Angolan earnings almost in half. Export earnings dropped from more than \$2.2 billion in 1985 to about \$1.2 to \$1.5 billion in 1986. In 1985 Angola paid about half of its earnings to its Communist backers for military support but last year was forced to request financial relief. Some debt payments were deferred, and Angola may have received a moratorium of as long as two years.

groups run deep within Angolan society, however, and national support is difficult to obtain. Morale of the Angolan leadership is fickle and subject to wide mood swings. The Angolan Army has always suffered poor morale; desertions are a problem, although it seems to muddle through without mutiny or mass refusal to fight. The economy suffered a major blow last year when the drop in oil prices tarnished the only economic bright spot, but the government apparently believes it has suffered through the worst. The sharp slump in earnings affected the government's plans to revitalize the civilian economy and most of the plans are now on hold. Military deliveries were continued at a high level, but the decline in oil revenues forced the Soviets and the Cubans to defer some debt payments at increased direct cost to themselves.

### South African Involvement

12. Pretoria's commitment to UNITA will remain strong. Material support and combat assistance most likely will continue through the period of this Estimate although there are indications that South Africa has considered putting limitations on its involvement because of increasing risks, limited resources, and other priorities. Pretoria, for example, is concerned by the growth in Angolan air defenses, which extend across most of southern Angola and cover a substantial part of the remainder. Resupply flights to UNITA forces in northern Angola may have been scaled back as a result. Nevertheless, if the insurgents were to be in serious danger, the South Africans probably would directly intervene in the combat to the extent necessary to remove the immediate threat.

### Soviet and Cuban Role

13. Angola's Soviet and Cuban backers are no doubt concerned by economic and military developments in Angola; however, neither the regime they support nor their influence is in immediate danger, and they

probably believe the military situation is manageable. As long as this situation holds, Moscow and Havana are likely to continue their established roles of providing the bulk of Angola's weapons and equipment, guarding the main garrisons and key facilities, as well as intrusive advisory support and direction. Increased or more direct involvement probably would be prompted by a serious deterioration in the security situation marked either by UNITA gains or a major South African intervention into Angola.

### Alternative Outcomes

14. Military initiatives by either side in the coming year are not likely to produce a resolution of the conflict or swing the initiative decisively in either direction. Nevertheless, uncertainties over the influence of the key factors suggest that alternative outcomes are possible.

### More Likely

15. Without a significant change in the key factors—which is not likely—neither side will gain a decisive advantage. Steady government pressure in the southeast combined with changed UNITA tactics makes some government territorial gains likely; Canggamba and Lumbala N'Guimbo may be taken and Mavinga threatened, but UNITA headquarters at Jamba most likely will remain secure. Although penetration of UNITA territory along narrow axes will give the government some tactical advantages and propaganda bragging rights, the gains are not likely to be decisive or enduring.

16. UNITA's intention to emphasize its guerrilla campaign makes increased activity in the northern part of the country likely. The insurgents probably will focus on its traditional objectives—government administrative centers, transportation routes, and economic targets—in central and northern Angola. The diamond mines have been attacked again, and the threat to the oil facilities on the coast probably will increase. Nevertheless, UNITA's actions probably will not force Luanda into a major withdrawal from the southeast, although the regime will be concerned.

17. While the level of Soviet and Cuban deliveries may fluctuate, the Soviet and Cuban commitment is likely to continue at about present levels with no significant change in the nature of their involvement, in the absence of a major South African intervention. Likewise, South African support to UNITA—materiel and limited combat support—is likely to continue at about present levels with one reservation. Should

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Mavinga be seriously threatened, Pretoria, after careful evaluation, probably would intervene in considerable force. [REDACTED]

18. There is an increased chance for small-scale conflict along the Angola-Zaire border this year. Luanda believes UNITA is routinely operating from inside Zaire, and has already conducted several small incursions while threatening more. Luanda, however, is not likely to sponsor a major attack into Zaire in the near term. The border incidents and regional diplomatic efforts to bring pressure on Zaire probably will be unsuccessful in reducing Zairian support for UNITA. Increased Zairian insecurities, however, probably will stimulate new requests for security assistance from its Western supporters. [REDACTED]

#### Less Likely

19. Military successes, good fortune, and opponents' miscues could tilt the situation more favorably toward either side, although it is highly unlikely that the shift would be decisive this year. [REDACTED]

20. For Luanda, careful military moves and the consolidation of gains combined with less than expected insurgent resistance could allow government forces to move farther and faster than expected, particularly if UNITA operations in the north fail to distract the government. If the threat to Mavinga seriously threatens UNITA's forces, a major South African intervention could provoke a direct confrontation with Cuban troops and increase the risk to Soviet advisers. In the event of a clash, it is not likely that either side would immediately push toward a major escalation of the conflict. Both sides probably would look for a response that kept the military balance at minimum risk and cost. [REDACTED]

21. A more favorable scenario for UNITA would involve successful harassment of ponderous and slow-moving government forces in the southeast that become pinned down by needs of rear area security and desperately need reinforcement. If combined with a significant increase in activity in northern Angola, the government probably would be faced with the dilemma of abandoning or delaying southeastern operations to enhance defenses around the capital. Successful attacks on oil facilities in Cabinda and the northwest would jeopardize Luanda's ability to pay for the war, limit economic deterioration, and attract Western investment. As in the past, Soviet or Cuban support probably would be increased to include additional Soviet arms deliveries, augmentation of Cuban forces, and a possible Cuban combat role. [REDACTED]

## Diplomatic Arena

### Prospects for Reconciliation

22. Luanda's concentration on a military solution underestimates UNITA's fundamental military and political strength and the depth of South Africa's commitment, which guarantees a continuation of the conflict and makes prospects for reconciliation virtually nil during the period of this Estimate. Publicly, Luanda maintains that amnesty for the rank and file is the only alternative, and private contacts with the UNITA leadership seem aimed at producing dissension in UNITA ranks rather than establishing an opening. [REDACTED]

### Benguela Initiative

23. The Angolan Government supports regional interest in the reopening of the Benguela Railroad as an alternative to routes through South Africa. The line running from the Zairian and Zambian mines to an Angolan seaport has been effectively closed for more than a decade by UNITA sabotage, and UNITA's cooperation would be required if the line were to be refurbished and reopened. UNITA would levy a hefty price, and Luanda is not likely to agree to UNITA's conditions. Moreover, South Africa opposes the initiative and probably has made its views clear to UNITA. [REDACTED]

### Implications for the United States

24. Luanda apparently is counting on a change to an administration that it believes will be more friendly and is not likely to be receptive to new initiatives during the period of this Estimate. Luanda charges that the United States, by supporting Savimbi, has abandoned the role of honest broker and has demanded diplomatic recognition and end of aid to UNITA as conditions for resumption of talks on a regional settlement that ties Namibian independence under UN Resolution 435 to a Cuban troop withdrawal. Senior Angolan officials have spoken harshly about US policies; one characterized US actions as "an act of war." Privately, the Angolans have repeated the same themes. Although the regime will continue to keep lines of communication open, its actions probably will continue to stall negotiations. [REDACTED]

25. Luanda most likely will continue its diplomatic efforts to focus regional and international criticism on US support for UNITA. The government moved rapidly to increase its diplomatic exchanges in Western Europe following Savimbi's recent trip to France and is likely to complement its diplomatic efforts with a public relations campaign to offset UNITA's efforts to gain support. [REDACTED]

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## ANNEX

## Contending Forces

UNITA probably has about 60,000 armed combatants of which 20,000 to 25,000 are well-trained soldiers organized in about 50 battalions, most of which have been deployed in southeastern Angola. The remainder are guerrillas that operate in varying strength throughout the country. Most of the battalions have 350 to 450 men armed with light weapons including mortars and recoilless rifles, and there are a few "regular" battalions of up to 1,500 men. The guerrillas—company-size formations of about 150 to 200 men or smaller local militias—frequently operate with the regular forces. In addition, UNITA has intelligence, communications, sabotage, logistics, and other support units. The UNITA leadership and its General Staff direct countrywide operations through regional "fronts," which are assigned a mix of regular and guerrilla contingents depending on the situation.

The Angolan Government has at least 100,000 men under arms in the regular Army, other security forces, and a territorial force or militia. The Army consists of about 60 brigades that average about 1,000 men each and are reinforced on occasion with territorial units. With the exception of a few mechanized brigades, most brigades are primarily infantry units with only limited artillery and armor support. The brigades are assigned to military regions, and theater-level operations may be controlled by a front. The Air Force includes about 200 operational fighters and helicopters. Additional transport aircraft provide vital logistic support for isolated forward bases. Despite a Soviet-sponsored training program for Angolan pilots, Cubans

fly many of the combat missions, and a Soviet military transport aviation unit supplements airlift needs. Radar coverage extends over most of the country, and a substantial number of air defense missiles defend key bases and tactical formations. However, questions remain on the overall effectiveness of the system.

The Angolan Army is backed by a 36,000-man Cuban military contingent—including some 28,000 combat troops—which guards rear bases, performs essential support services, and frees an equivalent number of Angolan troops for field operations. The Cubans aid the Angolans in combat by piloting aircraft, manning much of the air defense system, and providing other combat support but have not been directly involved in major combat operations. The Soviets have some 1,200 military advisers overseeing a full range of Angolan military activity, including planning and directing combat operations, but Soviet policy discourages direct participation in combat.

South Africa has more than 20,000 troops in northern Namibia, most of which are Namibian territorial forces backed by a South African strike force. The Namibian territorials are carrying increasing responsibility for operations in Angola, supplemented by a South African "foreign legion" manned by black expatriate and a small number of "special forces" teams. Pretoria deploys its aircraft forward to Namibia as needed for operations in Angola. Angola has the advantage in number of supersonic fighters, but Pretoria has the edge in pilot skills and tactics.